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SUBJECT: LEBANON: AOUNIST MP EXPLAINS THE GENERAL

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

11. (S) FPM MP Ibrahim Kanaan shared with us his views on party leader Michel Aoun, attempting to explain (while analyzing for himself) Aoun's motivations in collaborating with pro-Syrian political leaders and movements. Kanaan shared with us that the OrangeTV venture was flagging as a reflection of Aoun's loss of support. Nevertheless, Aoun's struggle with the government is important for the sake of the role of the presidency and Lebanon's political future. Aoun's provocations vis-a-vis the United States were motivated by a need to assert his relevance. An invitation to meet with the Ambassador would do much to restore his confidence. Similarly, Aoun's (and his followers') flirtation with pro-Syrian elements and movements does not reflect Aoun's orientation, but is a necessary step for Aoun to bring the pro-Syrians back into Lebanon's political fold. He has already shown his worth, Kanaan asserted, by defusing the confrontational powder keg of January 23. Aoun would support the tribunal as an element of a political settlement.
End Summary.

ORANGETV

12. (S) In the wake of recent public statements in which Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun has accused the United States of interference to the detriment of Lebanon, the Ambassador invited one of Aoun's most prominent MPs, Ibrahim Kanaan, to lunch, along with Pol/Econ Chief, at the Residence to ask after the General's mindset. Kanaan, who had just returned from a Dubai event intended to promote OrangeTV shares to Lebanese expats there, was upbeat despite the news that sales of those shares had been flagging recently. Kanaan attributed the slowdown to Lebanon's political standoff, and by way of example noted that Lebanese contractor -- and chief contractor for the non-CAA parts of the Embassy Baghdad construction -- Wadih Al Absi, an FPM supporter who had promised USD 50 million for Aoun's television venture, had decided to back out after "several conversations" with him and with Aoun.

NEGOTIATING WITH THE GOVERNMENT

13. (C) Kanaan claimed that the opposition is making an effort

to moderate its political speech. The Ambassador asked Kanaan why, when almost everyone in Lebanon's political conflict acknowledges that Aoun should come out of the crisis with at least four ministers in an expanded cabinet, FPM should carry on in the street. Kanaan replied that the goals FPM had set for itself from the beginning included more than mere participation in the government.

14. (C) The role of the presidency is at stake, he suggested, and only by enabling this Christian leader -- Michel Aoun and no other -- to restore the power of the presidency could Lebanon overcome the damage that was done to the political system by the 2005 parliamentary elections held under an unfair electoral law. Even though the present cabinet will last only a few months more, he elaborated, it will determine the political future of Lebanon for several years to come -- by taking key decisions and by bringing to power (via the Chamber of Deputies) Lebanon's next six-year president.

15. (C) On economic matters, there are no significant differences between the Aoun bloc and Saad Hariri's Mustaqbal. In politics, FPM can support March 14's pro-independence positions and basic vision for the country (including, he implied, the necessity of dealing with Hizballah's arsenal). Therefore strategically, the two sides are compatible. Their problems are technical, he claimed. "We have talked to them to explore common ground but each time there is a collapse immediately afterward," he said, repeating FPM's usual line claiming betrayal at the hands of the government side.

EXPLAINING AOUN'S BEHAVIOR

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16. (C) Kanaan then reviewed two years of tension-filled history between FPM and March 14, alleging that the General's good intentions to cooperate had been thwarted repeatedly by a Majority side that intended to monopolize power. A good-natured and non-confrontational interlocutor, Kanaan admitted respect for Druse leader Walid Jumblatt but recounted that Jumblatt had successfully maneuvered to exclude Aoun on several occasions, including by pulling the (mostly Christian) Qornet Shahwan opposition group away from Aoun before Aoun's return. (Note: Our recollection is that Qornet Shahwan leaders needed no pulling from Jumblatt. End note.) When Aoun left Paris, he was refused an audience with his host Jacques Chirac, a Hariri ally who had previously received Jumblatt and other Lebanese leaders with controversial pasts. As his plane approached Beirut, Jumblatt called him a "tsunami" about to befall Lebanon. Saad Hariri failed to show up at his airport arrival and no one from the Hariri family met Aoun when he went directly to Rafiq Hariri's gravesite.

17. (C) These developments may explain Aoun's famous ill humor when greeted by press at the airport ("shut up" were his first public utterances in his homeland after 15 years) and his speech near the gravesite in which he appeared to attack Jumblatt and Hariri for "feudal politics" and "capitalist politics," respectively. The Ambassador noted that Aoun's remarks were in writing and therefore must have been prepared beforehand, and that Aoun's swipe at Saad Hariri would have been even more bitter had Hariri come to welcome Aoun's return.

18. (C) Kanaan defended Aoun as "reactionnaire" not in the political sense but in his personal style. He further described Aoun's strategy as one of creating a "passage oblige" to make himself indispensable in Lebanon's political life. Aoun's public statements against the United States, like his protests which drove US Embassy personnel from Lebanon in 1989, are intended to draw attention to his concerns and prove his relevance.

INVITATION

¶9. (C) Despite this checkered history, the Ambassador told Kanaan the United States does not want a bad relationship with Aoun. Our problem with Aoun relates to the decisions he has made, and we are willing to talk with him about them. Given that the official meetings between the Ambassador and Aoun have become increasingly frigid, the Ambassador proposed a private dinner invitation to Aoun at the Residence. The invitation would be to Aoun's family or to whomever Aoun saw fit to accompany him. Kanaan welcomed the proposal and promised to convey it to Aoun.

AOUN AS INDISPENSABLE

¶10. (C) When the Ambassador noted recent inflammatory rhetoric of Shia FPM MP Abbas Hashem, Kanaan claimed that Aoun is only using Hashem (to what end he did not specify) and that he does not agree with Hashem's statements. Aoun is a good strategist and has a vision, Kanaan averred (presumably referring to Aoun's claim to have brought Shia and Christians together in a way no other leader had done). However he loses control of details. His skills in organizing his bloc and party leave something to be desired. As an example, Kanaan told us that he could easily approach any media outlet and give an uncleared statement without reference to Aoun or other FPM figures. FPM does not effectively control the message or actions of its members.

¶11. (C) Asked how Aoun could tolerate his son-in-law Gebran Bassil's appearances with pro-Syrian thug par excellence and rabble-rouser Wi'am Wihab and how Aoun himself could cozy up to avowed pro-Syrian Suleiman Franjieh, Kanaan agreed with our distaste for this "mariage de raison" in the service of Aoun's political goals. He debates with Bassil, for example, and rejects much of what Bassil does. As for Franjieh, he is "recuperable" Kanaan argued. Franjieh knows it was the Syrians who were the intellectual authors of his family's murder, he said, and he nurses a grudge against them more powerful than any he had ever had for Samir Geagea, who admitted to carrying out the fatal raid on Franjieh's

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childhood home.

¶12. (C) Aoun is the only figure who can bring Franjieh around from the pro-Syrian side, and he can do the same for veteran pro-Syrian politician Michel Murr (who, in our view, is less pro-Syrian now than Aoun is, perhaps due to his son Elias' influence). Aoun's power in Lebanese politics manifests itself in various ways, Kanaan said. The recent adoption of early parliamentary elections as a top opposition demand is his work, for example. Aoun compelled Franjieh to apologize for a crude insult to the Patriarch, he claimed (no doubt in reference to Franjieh's swipe that the Patriarch had been overstimulated by all the female flesh when March 14 widows and mothers visited him -- which provoked the amusing response from Dory Chamoun that Franjieh's remarks "flattered both sides"). Kanaan had also visited the Patriarch to plead Aoun's case, telling him that "if you reject Aoun you lose a partner."

¶13. (C) The Ambassador noted credible rumors that Aoun had been, at the December 1 beginning of the opposition's sit-in, the most radical and threatening. Aoun advocated the immediate invasion of the Grand Serail and the ousting of PM Siniora by brute force, even if it meant the PM's death, according to the story. Kanaan said that he could not know whether these things happened but that if it were shown to be true, Kanaan would resign. Kanaan countered that Aoun, through Bassil, had been the one to demand a pullback of opposition demonstrators on January 23. When Bassil reported back to Aoun that the other parties wanted to continue shutting down Beirut Aoun compelled Hassan Nasrallah to call

him and demanded Nasrallah stop. The Hizballah leader complied, and Beirut was saved.

¶14. (C) Aoun has a well-known talent for making poor judgment calls and choosing the wrong side, the Ambassador noted -- he was against Ta'if when the world supported the agreement; he was with Saddam Hussein after the Kuwait invasion, when the world was against him; and now he is siding with Syria and Iran when the world wants them out of Lebanon. Have the dinner and let's discuss it, Kanaan said. The Ambassador noted that Aoun had refused to accept the Prime Minister's phone call following the Paris III conference on January 25, when even Berri and Lahoud had no such qualms. Kanaan said Aoun was still upset by the actions of January 23, when Samir Geagea threatened and hurt his supporters while the Army stood by. The Army, he speculated, was idled by an excess of neutrality rather than by design, and was trying to "manage both sides," but nevertheless Aoun's people had suffered. The Hizballah and Amal demonstrators had imposed the roadblocks, the Ambassador noted, and in such a way as to send the very threatening signal that they could shut down Beirut and divide and isolate March 14 supporters if they wished.

¶15. (C) What do you think of Geagea, Kanaan asked suddenly. The Ambassador replied that, on January 23, Geagea had acted on the threatening behavior of the opposition demonstrators. It was Geagea's threats, Kanaan claimed, that had caused other parties to decide to seek weapons now. The Ambassador noted that threatening behavior began before the January 23 events, citing the prior day's speech by Michel Aoun which appeared to threaten any who refused to obey a strike throughout Beirut "when you see smoke over the city." Because of Aoun's provocative words, the Ambassador cancelled his planned meeting with Aoun for later that day, he recalled. In the end however, opposition demonstrators were not arrested for their illegal acts; it was only Geagea and Mustaqbal supporters who were arrested, for attempting to clear roadblocks. Kanaan downplayed the January 23 turmoil, claiming that Aoun had always rejected tire-burning and forceful protests. (Note: Despite Kanaan's claim, Aoun appeared to back such activity in his speech before the 23rd. End Note.)

¶16. (C) There are two ways to interpret Michel Aoun, Kanaan admitted, apparently conceding that Aoun's strategies played into Syria's hands. Either he is a tool of Damascus or naive. I'd be more confident if he were merely a tool, Kanaan said. Then we would at least know where he is heading and could plan accordingly. But you have to know the man, and for that reason your idea is the best -- repair the personal relationship, he concluded. For Aoun, at 73 (and

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facing his final chances at political success), that relationship is important.

ONGOING CRISIS

¶17. (C) The Ambassador noted that under the Lebanese constitution, the country might reach November without a resolution in the crisis and March 14 MPs would end up electing a president alone. The world would recognize such a president, but March 8 and its foreign backers would not, and we would return to a Lebanon with two governments. One way to avoid such a catastrophe, he added, would be for Aoun to announce his backing for a compromise candidate as part of a deal to end the crisis. Aoun isn't there yet, Kanaan replied. He has been pushed by March 14 leaders and for that reason he has revealed his presidential ambitions, setting up a confrontation. Kanaan agreed "personally" that it would be better for Aoun to step aside for a compromise candidate, confirm his role as a partner to the government and begin working on his legislative and reform agenda. Aoun's exile experience is one reason he can't give in so soon.

118. (C) The Ambassador proposed that Aoun ease tensions by doing something to demonstrate that, should he come to command a portion of the cabinet, he would not merely be a puppet of March 8 forces and their backers in Damascus and Tehran, and would not use his cabinet position to block important measures such as the tribunal. Kanaan replied that Syria is frightened of the tribunal and that Iran sees blocking the tribunal as one weapon in its campaign to weaken Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, the USG and France are pushing in the opposite direction and tensions are mounting between Tehran and Washington. Aoun has no personal problem with the tribunal, but he asks himself why, amid all this tension, he should get out in front of other parties?

119. (C) Nevertheless we'll vote for the tribunal, Kanaan promised, in the cabinet and in the parliament. March 14 wants a guarantee that Lebanon's killings will stop, he explained, while Syria and other parties are trying to trade on that desire. Syria wants assurances the Shebaa Farms will be considered part of the Golan, he averred. Even Amine Gemayel, when Kanaan approached him to offer condolences during the week after his son's death, responded to Kanaan's approach as a political gesture. As for the tribunal, he added, everyone knows it will be bigger than a mere criminal court for the prosecution of a group of crimes. The tribunal will be a symbol of the direction of the region for years to come.

120. (C) Michel Aoun should be intelligent enough to understand that his words and actions have consequences, the Ambassador stated, vis-a-vis his relations with Washington and with the rest of the international community. He must also realize he is being used. The Saudi-Iranian-Syrian-Hizballah diplomacy is moving on without Aoun. But Hizballah is cornered, Kanaan countered. Aoun understands the situation. The Ambassador told Kanaan, Aoun is stronger if he gives his support sparingly and to each side issue-by-issue. Having thrown in his lot with Hizballah via the MOU, Aoun's influence is owned by Hizballah now.

121. (C) Kanaan proposed that the USG and Aoun find a couple of issues on which they could work together constructively, such as the election law reform. One could start from the basis of the work of the Fouad Boutros commission or even of the 1960 election law, which the Patriarch favors. Will Aoun's partners go along with that plan, he asked? Let's put them to the test, Kanaan replied.

CHATAH CHANNEL

122. (C) Kanaan acknowledged that he had communicated with Siniora's Senior Advisor Mohammed Chatah three times. He described Chatah as very professional and constructive, and reported that Chatah had proposed coming to an "understanding" with Aoun. Aoun had greeted the communication channel positively, and Kanaan promised to try again to talk to Chatah (implying that it was Chatah's side, not Aoun's, that was reticent to continue contact).

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COMMENT

123. (C) It is refreshing to talk with Kanaan about Aoun -- as the Emboffs do frequently -- for one can have a genuine, mature, calm exchange of views. This is unusual for our meetings with the Aoun camp. Whereas Marwan Hamadeh accepts criticisms of Walid Jumblatt (and even offers some of his own -- well out of earshot of the Druse feudal lord, of course) and criticism of Saad Hariri seems to be the March 14 movement's most popular sport, Aoun has nourished an almost cult-like environment around him, where people seem either to fear or to adore him (or both). Probably similar to the

atmosphere in Hizballah, dissent and reflection are not welcome in the Aoun circles. Even the relatively moderate MP Ghassan Moukheiber gets defensive about Aoun, claiming without any demonstrable examples that the poor, victimized General is misunderstood and means well. Almost alone among the Aounists, Kanaan seemed to understand that at this point words are not sufficient. Kanaan claims to agree the General needs to do something tangible to show that he is not simply a tool of Damascus, Tehran, and Hizballah.

¶24. (C) But the General seems to look at any gesture that might distinguish his positions from those of Hizballah as equivalent to surrendering to March 14 demands. We note that, the day after our lunch with Kanaan, the General was still letting it rip against us: in a letter to the press, Aoun continued his barely veiled insults against us and the French. We suggested to Kanaan today that Aoun could signal to us that he is truly the man of institutions he claims to be by coming out strongly in favor of the LAF/Lebanese customs seizure of the Hizballah weapons on 2/8. If the stories are true that Aoun was told by Hizballah that he could not attend the scheduled dinner with the Ambassador (hosted by a third party) last Monday night, it is unlikely that he will be able to issue a satisfactory statement praising the LAF's confiscation of Hizballah weapons. But it is a fairly tangible was to test Aoun, and we hope he'll get a passing grade.

¶25. (C) The Aounists tend to peddle in resentments, the primary one, of course, being how the Christians have been marginalized by the money-and-politics machine of Saad Hariri. But one of their minor resentments is how the Ambassador and Embassy officers, in their view, socialize more with March 14 figures, who then become friends who infect the Embassy representatives with their insidious views about Aoun. Of course, March 14 stalwarts such as Marwan Hamadeh, Nayla Mouawad, Nassib Lahoud, Boutros Harb, and Walid Jumblatt have regularly invited us to meals, something that happens far less frequently with the Aounists. So the Ambassador's attempt to break the ice with Aoun through an invitation to a "family" dinner at the Residence is partly designed to address this resentment and partly to allow the General to talk in a more relaxed environment than our increasingly stiff meetings allow. Kanaan called the Ambassador on 2/9 to say that Aoun welcomes the event but that he will host the first such relaxed evening, at a time TBD. We think Aoun is probably too far gone for redemption at this point, but we are willing to try to focus him again on what are the real threats to Lebanon's' freedom and sovereignty. Maybe over dinner, he will listen to us more when we tell him that those threats are his allies.

FELTMAN